

A full-page background image showing a person from behind, walking away on a dirt path that leads into a dense forest. The person is wearing a bright green jacket and red pants. The path is flanked by tall, green trees and bushes, creating a sense of depth and journey.

ENQUIRING MINDS

Front for Rapid Economic Advancement
of India (FREA)

Curated by
Mira Savara

#Youth #Education #Development #Learning

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

~ Robert Frost

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Foreword

by Pankaj Sekhsaria

It was early June in 2019, a little more than six months since I had joined CTARA as a faculty member. A call from the Head, Satish Agnihotri, was always a sign of trouble, because it generally meant more work – a new idea he plans for, or something that had moved beyond the plan stage and needed action and implementation. And as a newly recruited member of the faculty, I was really in no position to say no.

So when he called informing me that he had agreed to help FREA host its reunion at IIT Bombay, and suggested that I coordinate the whole thing from the CTARA end of things, I put my hand on my forehead. ‘You will find it interesting and you are the most appropriate person for this,’ he said, quite convinced that this was indeed the case. The reason for his conviction was my own background and experience in the world of NGOs and development, partly the reason why he had recruited me to CTARA in the first place. Was there any chance I could say no?

Not only is coordination work often a chore, but I did not even know what FREA was, and why it was relevant

to us/me. It was not my idea anyway, so why this additional work? I do remember trying to wriggle out of it, but Satish was made of sterner stuff... and of more understanding, experience and perspective. In his long career as a successful bureaucrat and academic he had surely seen hundreds of 'wriggle-outers' like me!

To cut a long story short and looking back, in retrospect I can only be glad he didn't allow me to wriggle out. The work of coordination was not actually much (we also had a fantastic support team in CTARA), and the experience, learnings and reflections the engagement allowed me left me deeply richer. As parts of the FREA story and the people associated with it started to unravel, I saw much that I recognised. There were people I had known personally for a long time. There were many others I didn't know but had heard of and admired for their work. I now had an opportunity to meet them. And there was, of course, so much I didn't know but was now getting a glimpse into.

As I sat in the FREA reunion meeting with some of our students, it was amazing to see the passion of this group of grey, elderly—and a few doddering—men and women. It was a journey (many journeys, actually) into time and history and more importantly, into parallel lives and realities lived. In an earlier draft of this note I had articulated this as 'alternative realities'. I realised as I thought it through that while there is no problem with 'alternative', it is in a particular way an acknowledgement and reification of a central reality of which these are subsidiaries. But no, these were as real as anything else. Because we don't know about these realities does not mean they are any less significant. They uncover – to put it

rather simply – so much of what remained under the radar of what we think is happening. The problem then is with the radar and the lenses and frames by which we include and exclude, remember and forget, decide what is important and what is not.

One such moment shone through for me during those limited two days of engagement. It was the second day of the meet and one of our CTARA students came to me, panting with excitement he could barely contain. “That... that...”, he said, “is Arvind Gupta! I can’t believe I got a chance to meet him. I want to take a selfie with him.” This was, he said, his biggest fanboy moment. He’d grown up admiring this man, his work and the toys he made so beautifully and effortlessly. Meeting him was a dream come true. Maybe this one incident alone was worth the effort of helping to organise the meeting – what can be more wonderful than to see someone’s dream come true before your very eyes? I think, indeed, there are many Arvind Guptas in our world (each person in FREA was one in his/her own way!) and there are also many such fanboys and fangirls. There is a strong thriving ecosystem of this somewhere. Just because we don’t know about it does not mean that it does not exist. The problem is with our radars, our lenses and our frames.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Many months later Mira Savara came visiting and wanted to meet to discuss a book that she was trying to put together. We sat at a corner table in IIT’s Gulmohar restaurant, our Covid-19 masks first over our faces and then by our sides as we chatted about this and that, as well as about what she was

trying to do with this book that is currently in your hands. I don't remember too much of what she said or whether I was of any help, but what I do remember is the lunch we ate: buttered toast and *au gratin* – something I love but had not eaten for years. I didn't even know it was on the Gulmohar menu and Mira – who came out of nowhere – found it for us. “It has a lot of cheese,” I said tentatively, expecting her to reconsider her decision (her age, you know!) but hoping she would not, because that would have had implications for my lunch. My prodding was thankfully brushed aside and it was one sumptuous meal we had...I certainly did and I know she did too!

I cite the examples of Arvind and of Mira to show two different dimensions and experiences of a certain spirit that embodies FREA. There was a pulsating energy in those three days in October-November 2019 and that same energy shines through in this collection of stories that traverses lives and times and transcends people, perspectives and possibilities. I am, like I mentioned earlier, of a generation that grew up hearing of and being inspired by some of the people that made up FREA. It's a great effort to have put together these stories because it is an important record with which we might be able to inspire our own students. Time, context and constraints have surely changed, but the need for learning, experiments and stories that provide hope and new possibilities never goes away. This book is an excellent example of all that.

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1. *Nanoscale – Society’s deep impact on science, technology and innovation in India* (AuthorsUpFront, 2020);
2. *Instrumental Lives – an intimate biography of an Indian laboratory* (Routledge, 2019);
3. *Islands in Flux – the Andaman & Nicobar Story* (Harper Litmus 2019, 2017);
4. *The Last Wave – an island novel* (HarperCollins, 2014).

Introduction

by Mira Savara

In 1971 I returned to India after doing my Bachelor's degree and pre-med in the USA. I met with the then director of Grant Medical College, who convinced me that India did not need doctors, it needed management of medical care. He directed me to the Front for Rapid Economic Advancement of India (FREA).

I walked up the rickety old stairs of Grants building in Colaba to a small ten foot by ten foot cubicle. It was full of young men talking with great earnestness about issues and rural development. I felt at home instantly with all the chatter and the passion. And soon enough I had become a part of this ambitious collective: FREA.

FREA was inspired by the mood of its time. While in America the student revolution was at its peak, India was on the brink of economic collapse; the idea of new-found independence and a progressive future was already threatened. This inspired a group of IIT graduates to use their science and engineering skills for the rural development of a nation not much older than themselves. This in turn led

to the formation of FREA in 1968, with IIT-Bombay as the main centre of operations.

I was part of the planning and execution of the Involvement Programme of FREA, in which over 300 students from premier institutions participated in over 30 development projects in *gramdan* villages across ten states. They worked to build bridges, roads and dams, and set up surveys, processes and training modules to support the existing local efforts in rural development. The vision was ambitious – to bring rapid economic advancement to India. The experiments that ensued were nothing short of life-changing for the youth involved. The experiences we all had challenged our conventions of education, beliefs and ways of working on social issues.

FREA and the Involvement Programme faded away after a few years, as happens with many volunteer-led organisations and collectives. But when 50 years later the participants and contemporaries of FREA congregated at a reunion and recounted many of their experiences, a new realisation came to the fore.

FREA was created with a vision of rapid economic development, but what it built was a slow, entrenched groundwork of values for developmental work in the young minds it touched. FREA challenged their educational and academic foundations, and their outlook to supporting communities.

As we grew older, the few communications between Dunu Roy (the coordinator of FREA in those days) and myself were about the death of a few of our fellow travellers. It

was then that the idea of a reunion was discussed. Thanks to the internet we got in touch with over 50 people actively involved in FREA or its related organisations. A series of discussions ensued, people were requested to send in their memories and 25 of us finally met in November of 2019 at the place it all started, IIT Bombay. CTARA (Centre for Technical Alternatives for Rural Areas), a department of IIT inspired by FREA, kindly agreed to host the reunion. So, 50 years later, we sat in the same campus and shared and debated, as we had done 50 years earlier.

At the reunion, many participants maintained that FREA had made them look at life in a different way. There was no documentation of this collective memory of experiences and learnings. Many agreed that the FREA approach to using skills and expertise in rural development work had developed in them the art of questioning, of problem-solving and of collaboration. It had made them question their own education and realise the knowledge inherent in village communities.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

This book is based on the memories and stories of over 50 people who were involved in FREA at one time or another, in some capacity or the other.

The first section has stories of some of the people associated with FREA and what they're doing today. The second describes the beginnings of FREA, followed by the activities and learnings of its flagship programme in the third section. The fourth section is about the efforts and work behind the

scenes that made FREA possible. We see a glimpse of how FREA changed the lives of people it touched in the fifth section. And to conclude, the reflections and learnings from FREA in the voices of the people involved.

This book aims to bring forth the story of FREA, which is really the story of its people. It chronicles FREA's achievements in inspiring so many young and idealistic students, including me, to work in the field of rural development and social, gender and environmental change. One part nostalgia and one part transformation, this story is a testament to the fervour of young people and the ground-breaking power of experience, learning and questioning. We hope it will inspire others to do something similar.

I. Meet the People

*The stories of people associated with FREA
and what they are doing today*



Participants at the reunion Standing Left to Right: Imrana Qadeer, DC Agrawal, Nalini Nayak, Javed Anand, Ravi Chopra, Lalit Khanra, Mira Savara, AG Rao, Shobhana Prakash, Rakesh Dewan, Samir Bannerji, Arun Bidani, Geeta Athreya, Moloy Bannerji, BK Singh, Bhartendu Prakash, Satish Khot, Mira Sadgopal, Arvind Gupta. Sitting Left to Right: Dunu Roy, Anil Sadgopal, Shailesh Gandhi.

It was after 50 years that many of us were meeting. In the same room, connected by the same experience, we were there to share what FREA had taught us. We were missing many important people, some of whom had passed on. But their voices were with us through their colleagues and peers at FREA. Many admitted to being on the periphery of the FREA movement, yet influenced by its work.

FREA was not an 'organisation' in the usual sense of the term. One did not become a member, as no such concept existed. FREA was a network of people, a community that you became part of by association with its ideology, its vision, its work and its people.

That evening, what seemed like a blip in time – FREA – was revealed as the common denominator to the different ways in which each person continued working in social development. FREA had left a deep mark on our collective conscience and had altered our course. The post-FREA journey of many members was far more telling of what FREA had achieved, and is indicative of the sort of work that individuals did afterwards.

A brass bowl changed my life

AG Rao is a mechanical engineer. He has held many roles, from being one of the National Institute of Design's (NID) first product designers to teaching design at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT Bombay since 1970. His search for a design response to rural problems has resulted in a long-term professional commitment to bamboo craft. It gave birth to the bamboo studio at IDC. It also led to him starting a Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (SINE) company: AGBS (AG Bambu Style) Private Limited, which provides much needed earnings to crafts groups in villages through design, small technologies and marketing support. He is called the 'bamboo man' because of his efforts to promote the craft in the country.

One incident has always remained close to AG Rao's heart. Perhaps it harks back to when the seed of the design response was planted in him. He recalls,

"It was a hot summer. We were walking in the forested areas at Annupur, in Madhya Pradesh. This was my second trip to Shahdol district. Even though I come from Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, a place known for its dryness, the heat was too much. The tribal person who was leading us said, "*Hum pabunch gaye*" (we have reached). There was a small hut on an elevated bit of land. We went inside. The hut was made of bamboo reeds and grass. The unique thing about it was that it had no item from outside, the so-called civilised world, except for a brass bowl. The mahua fruits and grains were stored in a basket-like sack made of a nine-inch wide mat, woven from palm leaves.

“Then came the surprise: the offer of a drink. As the chief guest, I was served first. The clear liquid in the bowl reflecting the sunlight was none other than the indigenous mahua liquor distilled from the natural sweet mahua flower. I was hungry and was a little worried about drinking hard liquor on an empty stomach. But the affection with which the family served us the drink had doused our doubts or hesitation. It took all but a sip for the drink to be transformed into a heavenly spirit – the *somras*. After I finished, the vessel had to be cleaned for the next person to drink. That was the only brass bowl they had. The moment etched a deep impression on my conscience.”

For AG Rao and many others like him, FREA provided a unique interaction with communities that lived a very different life. They brought with them a myriad of ideas and questions, and the earnestness of wanting to make a difference to the world.

Dilip Thakore, who is publisher and editor of *Education World*, India’s top education website for educators, parents and students, and ex-editor of *Business India*, the fortnightly business news magazine, shares his experience.

“I joined FREA when I came back from London. I was then a barrister at the Bombay High Court. In FREA I worked with some slums in Mumbai trying to sort out some of their legal problems. After a few years, I left the Bar because there was too much law and too little justice. I was disillusioned with the profession. I realised that even though I was a barrister, we couldn’t get anywhere, you know – there was no support system. The year I was chairman for FREA, I realised how difficult it is to get things done in India.

“I was quite active in politics in England. And there you could access anybody you like, including the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. Here, you couldn’t even get to see your corporator! It came as a big shock to me and led me to a crucial decision. In 1977, I contested as a candidate from South Bombay in the Emergency elections. I filed my nomination as an Independent. But when I went to file my nomination papers, the Janata Party people convinced me to not split the vote. So I worked for the Janata Party, and raised quite a lot of money for them in that historic election, which we won.

In 1978, I became editor of *Business India*. The FREA experience influenced me in taking up the editorship – our manifesto was almost the same: that we wanted rapid economic advancement.

“And I felt that the best way to do it was to revive the free enterprise traditions of this country that had made us one of the world’s richest nations right up to the year 1717. Then we started our magazine, *Education World*, which I am still publishing.” The bug of rapid economic development that Dilip Thakore had caught as a young chairman of FREA remained in his pursuits thereafter.

Channelling that inner revolution

For most of us, the driving factor to join FREA was to channel our passion to revolutionise the system and society. **Javed Anand** had a similar inspiration.

“If I was not a coward, I would quite likely have joined the Naxalite movement. But because I am a coward, I thought of a somewhat simpler way of trying to get to the same end. And that was joining FREA in 1972. I spent the first year travelling across India, trying to get students interested in social projects. And then in '73 there was a terrible drought in Marathwada in Maharashtra. So I, along with the group of 30 to 40 volunteers, spent a month and a half there. Some of us stayed on for longer. I was with FREA till 1976.

In '76-77, Mira and I, along with a few other groups from the left circuit got together to form what we called the Institute for Social Research and Education (ISRE). The idea was to theorise on where that revolution would be and how soon it was going to come, and so on. I soon moved to journalism. After the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 there was a terrible kind of anti-Muslim pogrom in Mumbai. Teesta (Setalvad) and I left mainstream journalism and started *Communalism Combat: Journalism at the service of activism*, for ten years. Along with advocacy, most of our energy was focused on saying, “Punish those who are guilty for what happened in Bombay in 1992”. This advocacy did not get very far; nobody got punished for guilt... and then Gujarat 2002 happened! Then we started Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), which is one of the organisations that I am busy with. For the first time we said, we must intervene in the court, since we thought legal intervention can bring about some results. And it has. CJP is a human

rights movement dedicated to upholding and defending the freedom and constitutional rights of all Indians.

In the meantime, while engaging with the issue of communalism, we felt that there is not only the question of Hindu communalism, but equally of Muslim communalism. And you cannot fight one without fighting the other. So, some of us started an organisation called Muslims For Secular Democracy in 2003, which was very active for a year. After some time of hibernation, it was reincarnated in 2016 as Indian Muslims For Secular Democracy. This is where I am.”

Javed’s ideological journey brought him to FREA, and then took him to various other causes into which he channelled that revolution within him.

Ajit Balakrishnan, Founder and CEO of Rediff.com always wanted to do something on his own, long before the start-up culture existed. He recalls how the FREA experience left a permanent impression on a middle-class boy like him, who sought many dimensions in life.

“I’ve been an entrepreneur throughout my life, the main one I created being Rediff. In the last five years I have spent seven, eight hours a day writing the computer course Python. That’s where I get my kick. I wanted to use technology for social good. What I want, inspired by FREA, is an online court. For example, if two merchants quarrel for an amount of ₹10,000, the courts could take years resolving the matter. My dream was a FREA type fantasy, to have a number of ATM-like booths all over the country. If two merchants have a fight, they can go in front of this justice ATM, put ₹200 and get an instant printout of the judgement.”

Ajit has been Chairman of the Board of Governors of IIM Calcutta. He was named Chairman Emeritus of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). He has served on several government committees including the Chairman of the Government of India, Ministry of Information Technology Working Group and as a member of the Central Advisory Board of Education of the Government of India. He has written a book called *The Wave Rider*, which recounts how he battled adversaries many times his size; fended off avaricious lawyers who tried to extort money through class action suits in the tough courts of lower Manhattan; rebuffed investment bankers who tried to engineer the sale of his company; and tried to make sense of a world where technology and business models change every few months.